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XII

POLITICS

TO write of the politics of one country in the language of another is almost certain to foster misconceptions. Political terminology grows out of national and local experience, so that a Liberal party may actually be reactionary, a Radical group conservative, and a Conservative bloc progressive; the names are entirely the product of time and circumstance. And to generalize upon the shades of political opinion in a country is almost surely to do violence to partisan sentiment, as well as to truth itself. If, on the other hand, one attempts to deal justly with each development of political thought, one is immediately caught in the web of tedious detail.

All these reflections apply to Haiti. Her political history is endlessly complicated, not only in the sequence of events, but in the intertwining prejudices of color, caste, sectionalism, education, heritage. Haitian writers have concerned themselves more frequently with politics than with any other subject; their diagnoses and remedies are familiar to the thought of élite citizens. Yet it is doubtful whether these authors have ever affected the political reality, except possibly in 1843. Theory and practice have consistently diverged: both form a part of the political complexion of Haiti, yet to treat either in detail would require an overbalanced discussion of political matters in a country nine tenths of whose people are normally unconcerned with politics. Let us then try to discover briefly how rulers have achieved and lost power, and how they have managed their government.

Of all the social institutions which had to find their own shape in 1804 upon the achievement of independence, the one for which the people as a whole had least preparation was government. Assuming the major institutions of a society to consist of economic life, government, religion, and marriage, one realizes the problems which faced the free Haitians in all of these categories. Satisfactory or partial, we have seen the solutions arrived at in all respects except government —solutions which modified and adapted old French colonial practice or African tradition. Neither French nor African guides would serve in politics, however. People who have just thrown off the yoke of a

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175 178 64 slave system are not likely to assume it again; and the aristocrats, ever intent upon forgetting their African forebears, would certainly not turn to the Dark Continent for political inspiration.

175 642 701 643 Although the revolution had brought to the fore men of military experience and even genius, it had driven out or killed every single person of experience in civil government. The affranchis of the old régime had been denied political rights long before 1791; by 1804 few could have had any memory of active participation in government.[1] Toussaint was dead. The only authority of any significance was military. Consequently the new state was built upon army control and directed by army officers. Dessalines as commander in chief took the title of governor-general, later of emperor, but was in reality a military ruler. Fearful as he was of a new French invasion, he set his generals over the districts, organized his people as an army ready for immediate mobilization, and ruled as dictator.

175 642 This was all the Haitians had as political background: a military dictatorship. The Founding Fathers of Haiti, if so they might be called, had almost nothing to work with, nothing to build upon: neither a Magna Carta of the Blacks, nor any precedent of an independent Negro state anywhere in this white man's world; neither heritage of local responsibility and political debate to sow the seeds of democracy, nor any example of self-government in the American tropics to offer a pattern[2]—many of the known forms of government were a practical impossibility for the Haitians because of their need of continued defense against foreign enemies, their slave heritage, their inexperience in self-government, their complete lack of a middle class.

175 668 Hardly one tenth of the people in any case was capable of giving detailed thought to the form which government should take. The mass of ex-slaves had been fighting only *against* slavery, against the hated white rulers, not *for* democracy or any other abstraction. Their freedom achieved, they would not be the ones to make decisions.

[642] All political choices would be made by the generals, by men of property and position, by the few whose persistent ambition made them stand out from the masses.

1. Such participation in French colonial politics would have been before the restrictive laws of 1771.

2. It must be recalled that Haiti was the second free country to be established in the Western Hemisphere, and that Liberia, in Africa, was still far in the future.

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perfectly educated, and because other matters seemed infinitely more pressing than the setting up of schools, the early Haitians, united in 1804, fell apart within a single generation. On one hand were the élite and a few other townspeople who knew at least something of the outside world; on the other the masses of toiling countryfolk to whom tiny Haitian valleys were the whole universe. The young men of these two classes coming to power could not understand each other; they could not make concessions to each other; and as they fought for what they held true, each grew suspicious of the other if not permanently hostile. The lack of common understanding might still have been repaired in any one generation, but no single president had the vision to inaugurate universal education. Aside from the expense, certain powerful élite citizens often expressed their doubts as to the educability of the peasants; as property owners they would undoubtedly have objected to the unsettling of the economic order, which was based upon the work of an ignorant mass of blacks.[16]

Without education, the political sphere went unenriched by any flow of new blood from the people. Politics existed in a vacuum. The earthy, candid criticisms of a politically conscious folk never invigorated the discussion of national affairs. Without education, the people had no standards of comparison of Haiti with other nations, and were the easy dupes of whatever insurrectionary agitator could persuade them that their daily woes were caused by the current administration. Without education, high political office became a prerogative of the few, a contest between the Ins and the Outs, a path to personal wealth. Without education, Haiti could never be more than a dictatorship by a man or a clique, her stability endangered with the downfall of each incumbent, for dictatorships rarely provide for continuity in government.

Another great weakness was the notion that national happiness could be achieved by political means primarily. After the germinal ideas of Christophe and Pétion, which had a basis in economic behavior, hardly another important concept came out of a century of presidents. Haitian politicians have been great arrangers: they have given the country eighteen constitutions and innumerable codes, all admirable in their loving solicitude for precise detail. The common feeling of political aspirants has been, "If we are given power, all will

16. This argument is clearly stated in Madiou, *op. cit.*, III, 176 ff.

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XIII

CONSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL FORMS

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QUITE aside from its castes and the political separation of 1807–20, Haiti has always consisted of two nations, one living in and near the towns and so within reach of established government, the other rural and yet capable of ordering its own affairs by folk rules without much actual governmental machinery. It is through the former that Haiti has a political history. Indeed, one is tempted to say that more than half the people have continually got along without any government whatever of a formal sort, for being peaceably inclined they have found custom and usage [669] sufficient for their needs. These people have been rarely disturbed by the state's rulers; revolutionary chieftains alone have found it worth their while to stir up the country folk to an active interest in politics.

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The formal subdivisions of Haiti have been, through most of its history, three: the *commune*, roughly corresponding to the American township; the *arrondissement*, a group of communes, just as the American county is a group of townships; and the *département*, comprising several arrondissements. All three terms were borrowed from France, although their significance was altered when applied to the Haitian scene.

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In the days of Toussaint, Dessalines, and Christophe, the government had owned vast plantations which were under the control of the military. Pétion and Boyer instituted the commune by combining numerous estates and farms into a group likewise to be controlled by soldiers. Until the American Occupation the police system of the country was military, with ordinary soldiers keeping order and making arrests when necessary. Since few people are less given to disorder than the Haitian peasants, the task of keeping order was not a serious one; indeed, soldiers were frequently stationed among their friends and relatives, who never thought of them as police. It some- [293] times happened, however, that soldiers were assigned to other parts of the country, where they swaggered about with their *cocomacaques* (heavy-jointed canes), using these or the flat of their swords to enforce their often arbitrary commands.

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In every commune recognized by the state was an important

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In every commune recognized by the state was an important

official appointed by the president—the *juge de paix*. The term has little relation to our "justice of the peace." It implies rather the function performed by the old English country squire, who often by his prestige managed to patch up differences between neighbors without allowing matters to come to an issue, but who if the issue were joined sat as judge. The decision of the judge was final in all civil matters up to fifty dollars—and the case was rare in which peasants dealt in affairs as large as this. In the more populous communes (those containing large villages or towns) the juge de paix was more impersonal. He might render decisions, subject to appeal, in cases up to a hundred dollars. All minor police cases came within the province of this official, whose judgment was final in matters up to a twelve-dollar fine or a jail sentence of five days. All criminal cases began with this judge, but those of the gravest sort were speedily sent to higher courts.

By and large rural Haiti got along with a minimum of civil government, and urban Haiti was governed much as a small provincial town of the nineteenth century.

Several communes made an arrondissement, another political subdivision with a distinct military cast. Through most of her history Haiti had an average of about twenty of these arrondissements, each of them presided over by an army officer of high rank appointed by the president. In arrondissements containing important capitals a general, in lesser ones a brigadier-general, exercised both military and civil authority. This man was the medium through which the central government made known its decisions and laws. Because life could be tedious in a dull country town, in a district full of peaceful peasants, many of the generals spent their time in reflecting upon the chances of a successful insurrection which might make them important in national affairs. As already noted, the standard of discipline in the army was never very high, so that the presiding officer of an arrondissement might have a real sinecure if he was not ambitious.[1]

1. The military arrondissement always bore the name of the principal town or village within its borders. The following list shows the important places during the time of Boyer:
In the department of the North there were five arrondissements: Cap-Haïtien, Grande-Rivière, Marmelade, Fort Liberté, Limbé.
In the Northwest, three: Port-de-Paix, Cap Nicolas Môle, Le Borgne.
In the Artibonite, three: Saint-Marc, Gonaïves, Mirebalais.
In the West, three: Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, Léogane.
In the South, five: Les Cayes, Jérémie, Aquin, Tiburon, Nippes.